

Analysis of “The Ugly Tourist” by Jamaica Kincaid

By Jamie Gillette

Writing in the unexpected second-person “you” voice, Jamaica Kincaid’s piece “The Ugly Tourist” explores the idea of the divide between tourists and the indigenous people those tourists travel so far to view. This essay defines both what it is to be a tourist as well as to live in the gaze of tourists as the other. The writing style is as aggressive as its message, reminding “you” the audience to reconsider the power dynamic that exists between locals and those from away.

The title introduces a key word used multiple times throughout the essay: ugly. The connotation of ugly links to ugliness of body as well as spirit, and Kincaid intends both. “You” are ugly because you feel “alone,” “unnoticed,” and “unloved” even in the crowd of the busy street where you live; “you” are ugly because your only relief is to visit “heaps of death and ruin and feeling alive and [be] inspired by it”; “you” are even ugly because “your stilled body stinking and glistening in the sand” with its ‘s’ alliteration is even uglier than the hole the natives squat over. All this ugliness points out with unblinking gaze Kincaid’s central theme: “An ugly thing, that is what you become when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing” and the people that surround you hate you with their every fiber. Kincaid’s point rests in every way in that idea of separation.

All those “you”s add up to quite an accusation. Kincaid uses her rhetorical choices of pronouns, repeated throughout the piece, to distance the two groups of people inexorably apart. *Maybe* you are also nice “day to day,” and perhaps it is in those day to day moments that “you” can best identify with the plight of “they” who are visited by the hordes of tourists looking to gawk at the banality of the foreign world that is their own day to day existence. When we are both burdened by our own separate “banality and boredom,” neither has anything to envy. But as soon as one goes elsewhere, the distance returns. Regardless of attempts to understand each other, the tourist and the native live in such different literal and figurative worlds that true connection is impossible even if at the core each one shares the same desire: to be lifted out of “a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression” to someplace better. But Kincaid resists this connection: “we” is not a pronoun she uses a single time.

Amidst all this ugliness, the speaker refuses to let us look away despite the sense of division created by the deliberate deployment of pronouns. The piece begins with short, declarative ideas tied together in an attempt to define what “you” are: “You are not an ugly person all the time; you are not an ugly person ordinarily; you are not an ugly person day to day. From day to day, you are a nice person.” There is no equivocation here; under certain conditions, you are not ugly, no matter what. After the fourth sentence, however, sentence patterning changes. One hundred plus word length sentences become the norm, and these sentences are further complicated by multiple parenthetical phrases which attempt to neatly distinguish aspects of “your” life through categorizing labels. The result of this is the sentences and the breathless rationalization it wishes to convey just refuses to come to an end. Under certain other conditions, you are ugly, no matter what.

The piece returns to more conventional-length sentences when the deluge of the first paragraph finally ends only to be replaced by a deluge of a different sort: repetition and parallel structure to define who “they” are. The speaker turns her eye to what “every native everywhere” wants, which at its most fundamental is the same opportunities enjoyed by those “potential tourists” able to fulfill their potential. But, the essay concludes, “they are too poor” to do this. We all may have an “inner tourist,” the speaker concedes, but not all can fulfill these dreams of escape.

Kincaid seems to claim that we all have the potential to fall victim to the “grass is greener on the other side” trap. Even she, a native of island tourist destination Antigua, will be a tourist elsewhere and may repeat the ugliness visited upon herself by the outsiders visiting there. It is just what you are when you divided *yourself* from *them*: the other.

Kincaid, Jamaica. “The Ugly Tourist.” *The Norton Reader: an Anthology of Expository*

Prose, Ninth Edition. Ed. Linda H. Peterson, John C. Brereton, and Joan E. Hartman.

New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. 642-644. Print.

- Isolate a particular phrase or word that is repeated in the essay. What is the intent in this repetition?
- What do you notice about sentence length? What is the effect of the long sentences that dominate the piece?
- How does the second paragraph compare to the first?
- What connections might you find to the piece, given that we live in an area frequented by tourists “from away”?
- What is the author’s purpose in her abrasive tone? Does she suggest any alternative?
- Representative sentence: “And you look at the things they can do with a piece of cloth, the things they fashion out of cheap, vulgarly colored (to you) twine, the way they squat down over a hole they have made in the ground, the hole itself is something to marvel at, and since you are being an ugly person this ugly but joyful thought will swell inside you: their ancestors were not clever in the way yours were, for then would it not be you who would be in harmony with nature and backwards in that charming way?”

Text of analysis – approximately 750 words